Western Lore

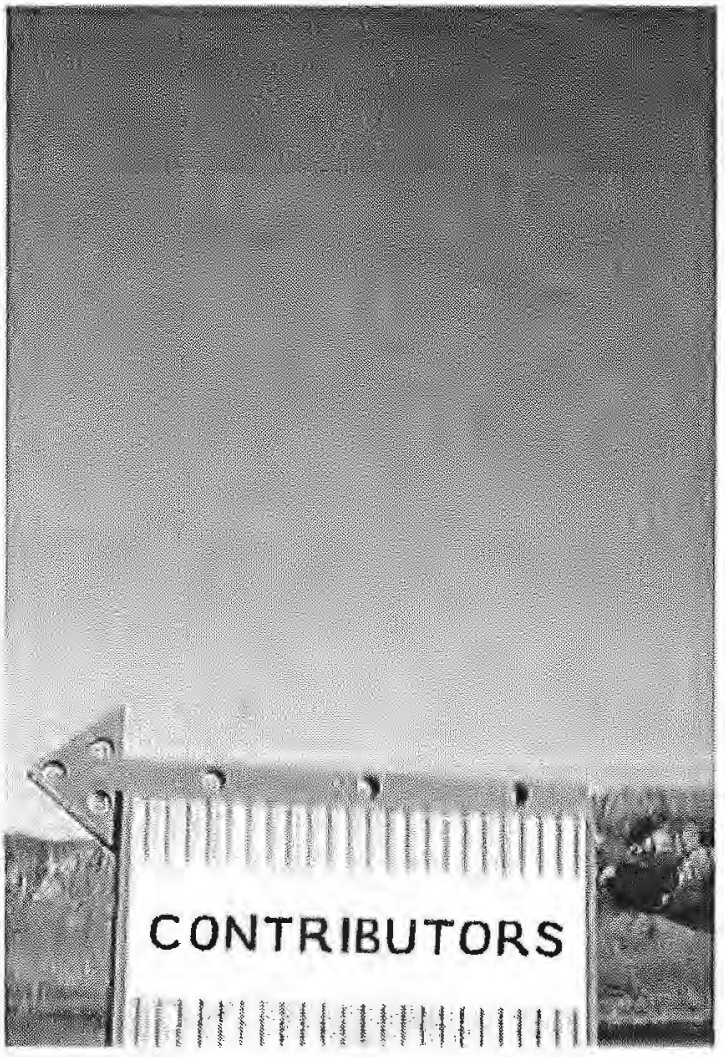
ISSUE NUMBER TWO

Western Lore

MAGAZINE

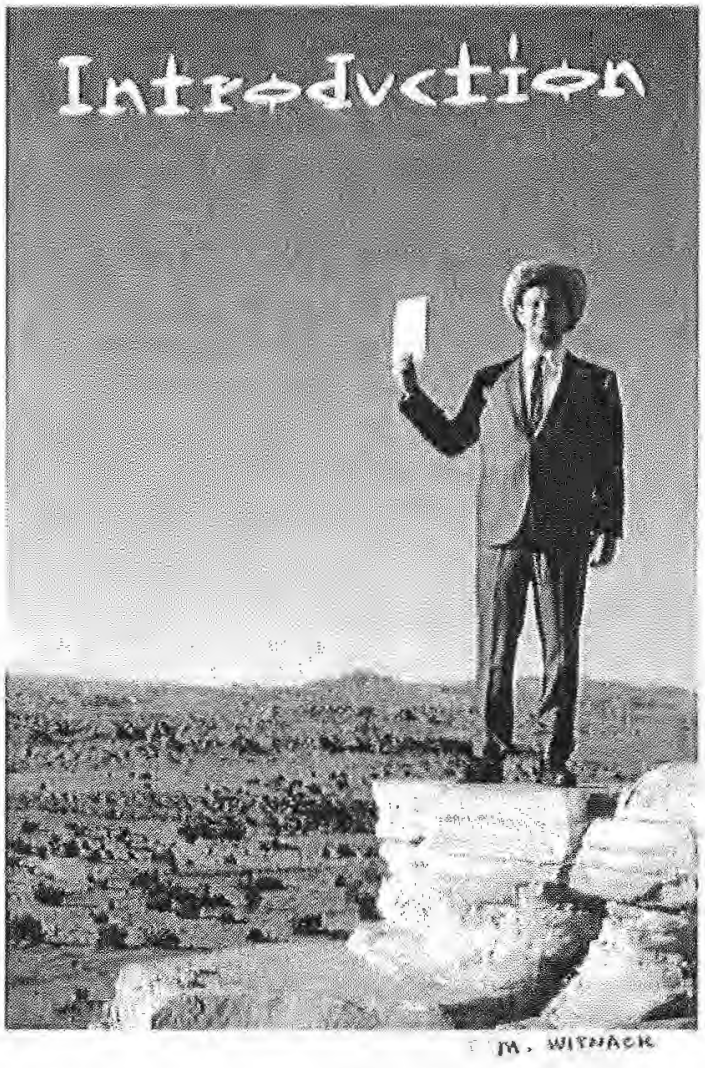
Welcome to Western Lore, issue number two; a home-made magazine loosely dealing with various western topics. The publishing schedule still exists on a "when I get around to it" time-frame and most other structures of production are as solid as Jello. More is bound to come at some point and in some form but beyond that it's a question mark.

Kay Nothstein, Jeff Darras, Gail Swanlund, Michele Witnack, and Tim White all threw in photos. Mr White wrote everything except the piece by Sean Dungan and Miss Swanlund, who also did a bit of editing. Richard Hansen and Mr. White handled the layout, design, and production chores.



WESTERN LORE MAGAZINE
2967 39TH STREET
SACRAMENTO, CA 95817

My love of being in the desert, the mystery that surrounds it, and my want to share stories and ideas brought *Western Lore* into being. That simple. Issue Number One was a blast to put out. It was easy too because I wasn't burdened by technology and the knowledge of understanding what I was doing. Sure I used my PC to write this stuff, had photos scanned and reprinted off a fancy computer, and had a basic idea of what I wanted the zine to be like, but I just spit out the words, cut and pasted them in format with the images and headed to Kinko's to print copies.



I learned a lot from that issue.

First off, it's not a good idea to sell a zine for 50 cents when each one costs $1.10 to print. I got that taken care of. Secondly, Richard Hansen finally convinced me that spending thirteen solid hours of a weekend cutting and pasting to end up with poor quality images and text isn't quite worth the effort. (Drinking a bunch of beer and blasting rock-n-roll records while doing it was kinda fun though.) From there I learned many more subtle things that I hope show in this issue. Overall I wanted this one to be bigger, to be more. Of what I wasn't sure. But that's the intent of this issue anyway. We'll see what I learn from this one in Issue Number Three.

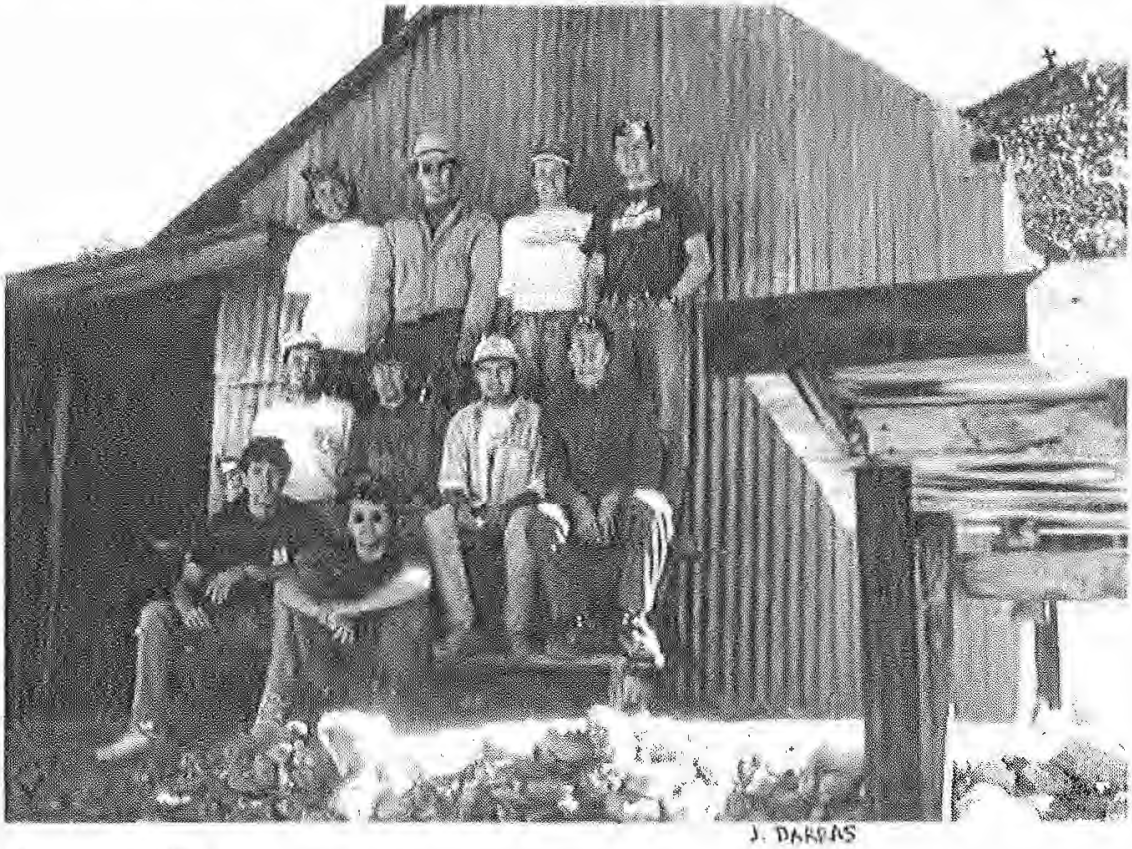
Enjoy.

Ghost Town Adventure Number Two

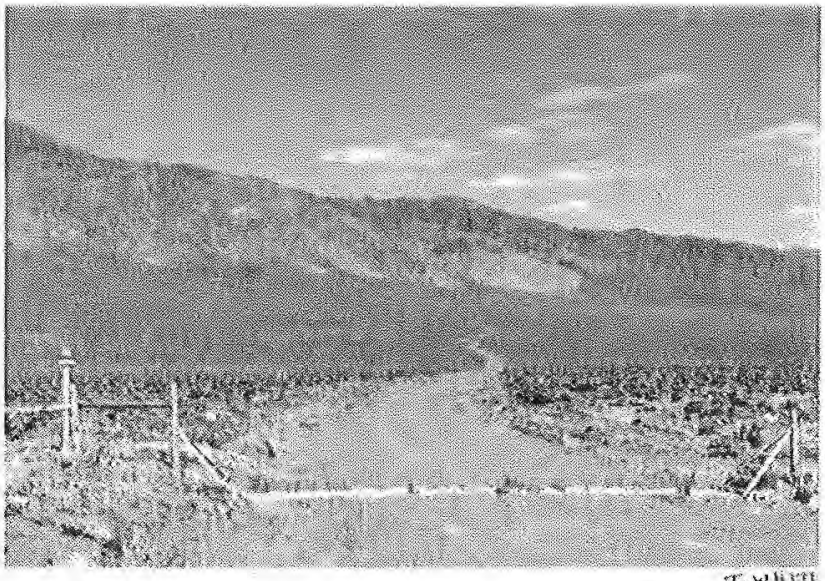
GOLD POINT

The first ghost town trip my friends and I took went so well we began to wonder if it was a fluke. We worried that planning another might be disappointing by comparison. We drove so dang long to get there and every aspect of the experience ended up different than we had expected. We were gambling a whole weekend and a bunch of gas. We decided to risk it.

We figured that one way to ensure a good ghost town trip was to make sure there was a town still standing — enough to call it a town anyway. We consulted our trusty *Sunset Ghost Towns of the West* book and chose Gold Point, Nevada. It appeared to be farther away than the first location we had visited but well worth the drive. One photo in our guide showed several buildings still very much intact, side by side along what appeared to be the main street. No people, none mentioned in the article — seemed ideal.



J. DARRAS



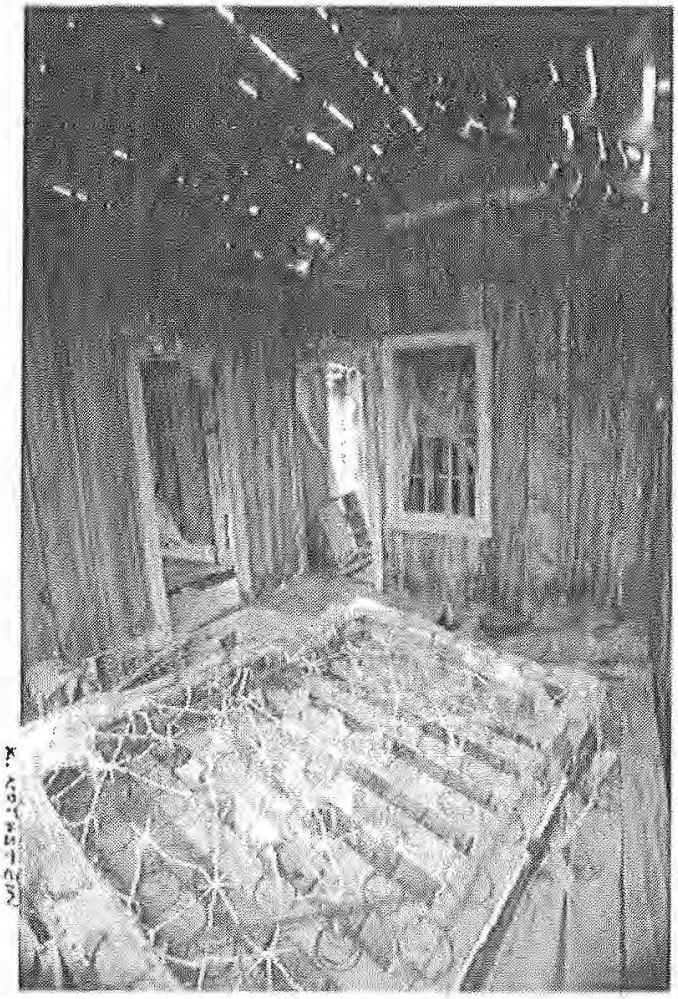
Inviting a bunch of friends also seemed like a way to make it fun. Excitement had began to smolder in the souls of those we had shared stories of the first ghost town experience with so a few fine fellows were eager to participate.

The attendants were Hans, Jeff and I — who pioneered the first adventure — William, Scott Johnson, Tony, Danny Thomas, and two guys with British accents who just got stoned the whole time. "Hey guys, what do you want for breakfast?" They thought they were really funny saying, "Wake and bake." Ha ha. I don't remember their names.

Hans, Jeff and I were located in northern Cal. and the others were in the south part of the state. This trip took some coordinating since they were driving from there and us from here. The dirt trails in the desert are often misleading but somebody, think it was Hans, devised a brilliant plan. We faxed the so. Cal. yokels maps. We determined what order people would show up based on when they planned on leaving and how far they would be traveling. The lucky ones who showed up first took pylons and beers. Every fork in the dirt road they placed a pylon with three beers underneath to indicate the correct direction. The first vehicle after the scout stopped at the pylon, drank one beer to represent their vehicle and continued on, leaving the empty to acknowledge their arrival. Everyone knew then how many people had arrived. The last group knew they were last because there was only one full beer left, so they picked up the empties and the pylons so as not to leave a trace. The plan was flawless.

Hans, Jeff and I flew along, driving on the desert dirt roads that make you feel like you are on the moon, for hours. When you pick a spot on a map it always seems to be closer than it really is but this misjudgment was embarrassing. Those life's-too-damn-easy-L.A.-kids only had to drive about six hours whereas Hans, Jeff, and I, the gracious hosts, drove damn near ten! We were too excited and tired to curse though.

Gold Point is located pretty damn far south, in a spacious, low elevation valley spotted with joshua trees — which at night look imposing, like people standing and staring all along the blue-black horizon. Spooky. The town was built in the 1860's, I think, and boomed for years due to a plethora of gold ore veins. It was pretty well established before fires hit and the mines' production decreased. People have always lived



there. The town has never been vacant.

This trip is when we first began to understand that the only way an old mining town that has been mostly abandoned can survive is if people *do* continually occupy what remains of the place. Otherwise, dumbshits come through these towns and vandalize to the point of nothingness. Few vacant towns remain intact. Remember this when you want a "souvenir," something to shoot at, or firewood. There used to be a cool-ass town called Aurora that sat on the border between California and Nevada that was easy to get to and completely abandoned. So, these devilish bastards from Los Angeles came through and tore down every single damn brick building in the town — sometime in the fifties — and trucked the materials back to the so-called city of angels to build rustic-looking chimneys out of weathered used bricks. Thanks - assholes.

Sorry to get off track.

It was a pretty long journey for all parties involved and quite late into the night before anyone finally arrived. Hans, Jeff and I got there close to last, if not last. We were driving through the valley and saw lights in the direction of the town. Bad sign. We realized that people lived there and we wouldn't be able to have that spot to ourselves. When we drove down the main street we could tell what a cool place it was and couldn't blame the handful of folks that did want to call it home base, for living at our camping destination. Worried about what decision the scouts had made, we drove a little past the town on the dirt roads. We were relieved to see cones and stopped to follow procedure. Eventually we found the designated camp spot — a random area of flat desert off the side of the trail out in the middle of nowheres. Fine by us. We had been driving for ten hours. We pulled up, plopped down some lawn chairs by the fire, and cracked open some beers. Hello friends.

I've been drunk before, I know that it can be fun, but things are different in the desert. A drunk like I experienced that night doesn't come from a cheap twelve pack — or a good one for that matter. This was a

quality high that Pabst alone can't offer. We were plain goofy. Ran around in the darkness, stumbled over sagebrush, sat down in the dirt and laughed over nothing. Giddy little kids were we, excited over damn near anything.

We found a necktie in Hans' truck and made him burn it because it represented people we didn't want to be that weekend. That turned into a ceremony, all of us looking for items that were with us that we could sacrifice as signifiers of aspects of our beings that we didn't like, didn't want to be, or wanted to rid ourselves. I can't write for beans and submitted my poorly written papers from my writing class.

After long hours of booze-soaked silliness and behavior that our mothers would have sent us to our rooms for, we called it a night. Struggling to pull my drunken body from the lawn chair, finding my sleeping bag, throwing it down and falling on it, are the last things I remembered that night. Oh, except for one thing. I peeked up at the sky at one point and couldn't believe how bright, and how many stars were out. The night sky isn't black, it's a mixture of the richest, deepest, darkest blues. The sky was so enveloping that it seemed to be more a large flat plane than space.

It was hard to imagine having been cold the night before when I was awakened by the blinding hot sun burning holes through my sleeping bag. In the desert you don't determine what time to wake up, the scorching rays of the sun takes care of that for you. Okay, too much cheap beer + not enough sleep = morning headache. While we were all walking around the campsite, grumbling at each other, shielding ourselves from the sun, we tried to figure out what could rectify the situation. I heard a

"pppssttt" sound and looked over to see a haggard-looking camper taking a mouthful of beer, kicking off alcohol consumption around seven in the morning. The hangover driven grumbling turned to painful groans and it wasn't long before someone spiked their coffee with whiskey.

We ate breakfast to absorb the booze and came up with an adventure plan. We were in the middle of some damn nice looking territory and wanted to explore. We drove around for a big chunk of the day just checking things out, looking for a place to camp for the night, far away from the town.

Nestled high on a hill, overlooking the large valley to the west was a little shack, Slim's diamond mine. That's what the sign placed over the mine entrance said. It looked as though Slim hadn't been there for some time, I'd guess forty, fifty years maybe. The cabin was mostly intact, good enough shape to sleep in. There was a little covered area that housed a good campfire pit, but the best part of the site was the bench that Slim placed in the front of the house, right on the cliff, overlooking the low, vast, sprawling valley below. Good job, Slim.

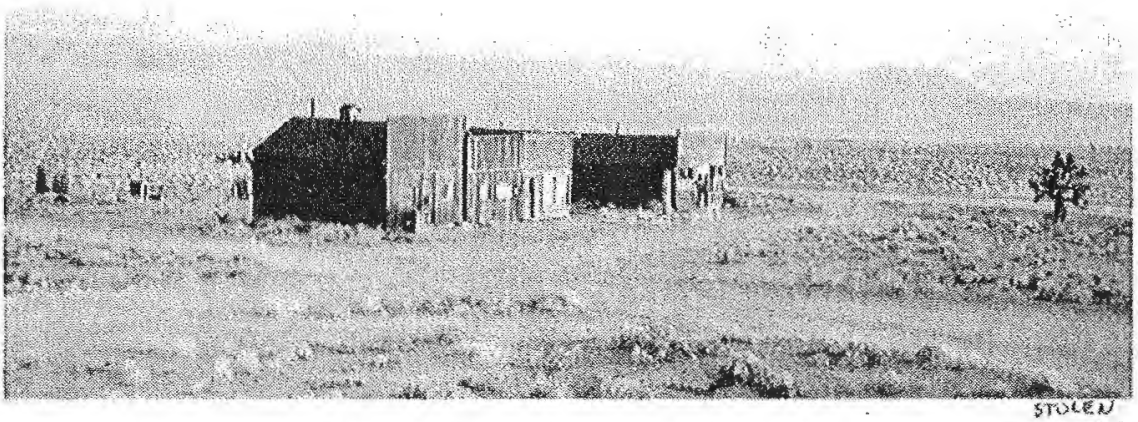
Some of us unloaded and set up camp: tiki torches, coolers, chairs, a string of those long plastic pennant things on a string that you see at car dealers. We had it all. A few others went exploring in a couple of the trucks and Wake and Bake got loaded.

Slim's mine was deluxe. It was still in pretty decent shape and seemed safe. We walked into the earth so far we expected to see the devil around any corner. There were shafts deep inside this mine that extended a good 30-40 feet below where we were (a hundred feet inside the hill). Slim was a crazy man for going in there everyday.

Bats. You couldn't really see them until you saw the light at the end of the tunnel, when you'd see black dots flying out. Scott was shining his flashlight along the walls and found a couple of sleeping bats. He went and got a jar and captured one of the lil' fellers. He talked of making bat-kabobs for dinner. After a close-up examination of said specimen we let the mini-monster go free. Those are some scary looking critters, those bats.

Behind the shack a hill went damn near straight up to heaven, a good 200 feet or so. Hans noticed a home-made crucifix at the peak. Having nothing better to do, he and I decided to hike up there. 200 feet isn't much unless it goes straight up, then it can be a real workout. It was well worth it. That peak was the highest around. A 360 degree view that kicked ass from any angle. The crucifix was about ten feet tall and Slim had gone so far as break up pieces of mirror and nail them to the face toward the west. Having realized what this would look like at sunset we knew all to well that we would have to return in a while with the others.

The other adventurers returned to camp with stories of testing the limits of their vehicles, Scott had his bat, the Brits were baked and Hans and I had a plan. We all proceeded to build a good fire and cooked a



tasty dinner. We were all relaxed as the sun threatened to go away.

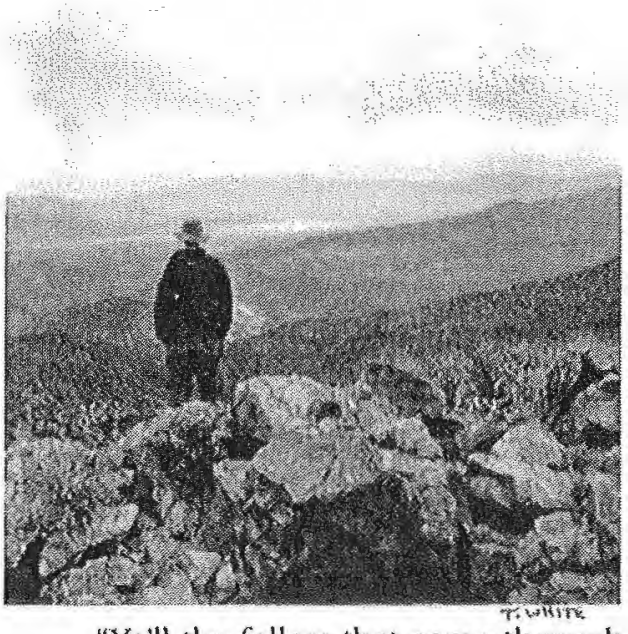
Hans and I were pleased that no one put up a fight about climbing to the peak to watch the sun go down. We put on warm clothes, packed some beers in our pockets and headed north. The whole journey up people were talking, giggling, making some sort of noise. Once on top, we looked west at the astounding spectacle, turned and looked at the cross that was so incredibly orange from the sunset reflecting off the busted up mirror pieces against the deep deep blue sky — so strong that it seemed to be on fire. Nobody spoke a word. The howling wind made the only noise. We just sat and stared in awe. First at the sunset, then at the cross, then at each other, amazed, deeply affected.

Time stood as still as our voices. If Henri Bergson were around, he'd probably argue for that moment, the same amount of time it takes to do a load of laundry in "standard time," was a perfect example of "real time" (he devised these theories concerning time at the turn of the century when our culture started becoming obsessed with clock watching and efficiency). All of us were oblivious to what our watches said, where we worked, when rent was due, and all that. I really like those times.

It grew increasingly dark and our bodies were drawn naturally downward toward the warmth of the campfire. We sat around the flames and shared stories and passions. We let the peace of our atmosphere control our mood. The youthful frantic behavior of the previous night must have been a release of our daily confining lifestyles because this night we were different. We had relaxed all of our discontent. All was right in our world.

We woke the next morning, packed up, and headed back down into the valley to see what Gold Point looked like in daylight.

What a town! We walked around in a mild state of disbelief. There were houses with furniture and stuff still intact and functional. There was an old gas pump from the twenties waiting for a car to pull up. Yeah. This town had a main street with buildings and sidewalks all connected side by side. It was a small town that has some truly great history, similar to towns that are currently kitsch pits playing on the hokey "feel" of the "old west" - wagon wheels, piss-poor tourist shops, old time photo shops, bad antique and craft stores, you know what I'm talking about. This town had



those elements, the gas pump, wooden sidewalks and stuff, but it was authentic. It wasn't a tourist town because nobody was selling and nobody was buying. It wasn't trying to recapture the past because it was too unsure of its future. Seemed to be caught still trying to figure out what it's going to do since the gold went away. Its honesty was staggering.

While standing around dumfounded, an old Ford pickup headed our way. An old guy pulled up, got out, let his dog out, and leaned up against the truck for what seemed like a half hour before he spoke.

"Ya'll the fellers that came through on Friday night?" was what he finally said. We told him that we were and he then said, "Saw you go up into the hills, didn't see ya come back, well, we just wrote ya off."

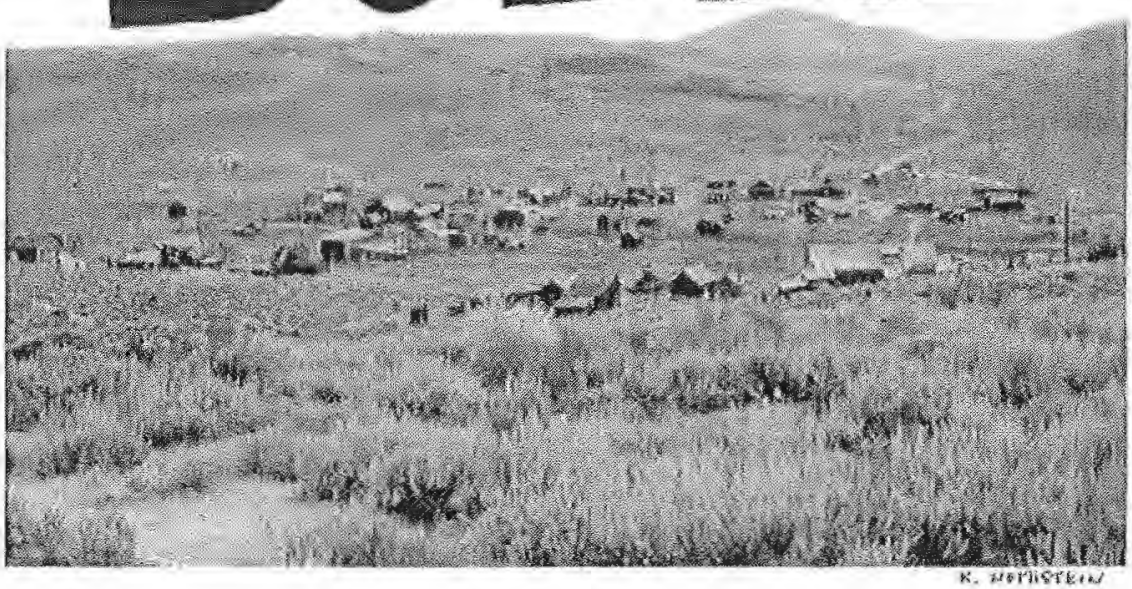
We began firing the questions that had been brewing. What the hell do you do out here? How many people live here? What do you do for water and food? Does the lack of civilization drive you bonkers?

He told us four people lived there year round, maybe ten or so during the summer months. Apparently they are into fixing up the buildings and maintaining the authentic feel of the town without turning it into a state park or letting vandals kill it off. Besides restoration work, they do a little mining — the tedious kind that isn't worth the large mining companies' time, which provides them with a little loot to afford a trip to L.A. every now and then, to buy large quantities of food and water.

He excitedly, well, as excited as a slow old desert dweller can get, told us about the big shebang they have once a year. Every 4th of July about two hundred people throng to the town and whoop it up. Bet they let off a few fine explosives too, seeing as how it's the desert and all. Those few people who live out there got a good thing going on. It's not the kind of thing that would suit everyone, including me, but you gotta see the beauty in living the dream, or at least the extreme. I'm sure it beats a dead-end job, an apartment in the projects and a stupid TV.

So that's it. We showed him our respect and admiration and let him get along protecting that great town. Then we drove, and drove, and drove some more. I think I got home about 11 or 12 that Sunday night and went to work at 7 the next morning. I'm sure I was exhausted and dazed by the experience and I don't remember that day at work at all. I do, however, remember the trip like it was yesterday.

BODIE



K. HOFFSTEIN

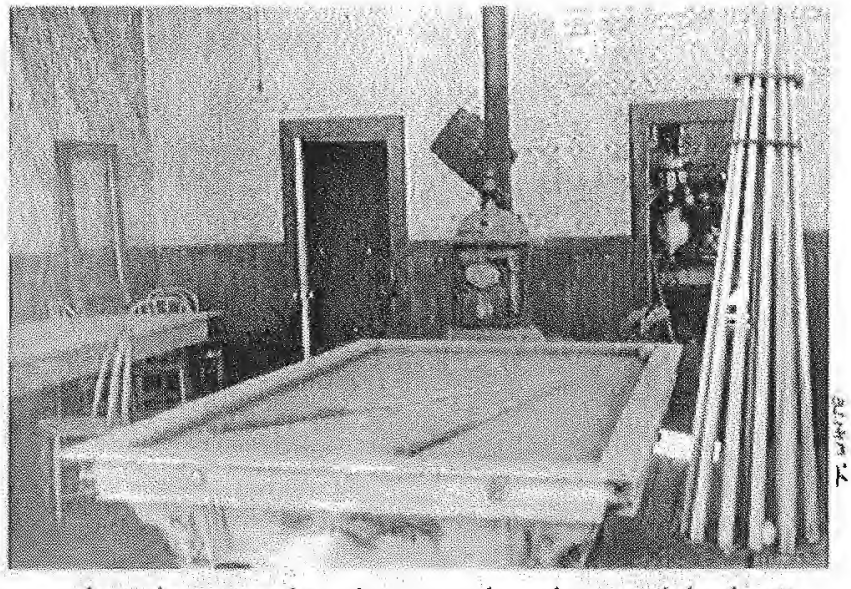
The ghost town of Bodie kicks ass, thinks I. Their are some who disagree and that is really bothersome because I don't think these people have placed it in the right context in order to appreciate its truly unique qualities. I had a friend tell me, with an expressionless look on her face, that she'd been to Bodie. I asked her what she thought. She just sighed, said it wasn't quite what she had expected and felt let down. This friend has an affection for the desert and done her fair share of tromping around in it, and well, I usually put her in the category of friends with good taste in stuff, so naturally, I was disappointed in her response.

I could understand her take, though. I had avoided visiting the place for a while because it is a state park and by definition can't be as fun as discovering a completely abandoned place to play around in — a true ghost town. One day however, when coming back from a trip to one of the towns we thought would be a stereotypical ghost, containing deserted standing buildings and lots of great junk (of course it wasn't), we stopped by Bodie to check it out. I fell in love.

To get to Bodie, you drive on a well-groomed dirt road for several miles, climbing to 8,400 feet, where on top of a drab mountain you'll see the sprawling remains of this once bustling large town. Many buildings are left standing, but you can tell by the empty spaces between them where the fires of 1892 and 1936 bit a few chunks off.

All of the ghost towns I've been to don't feel like they were once a place of exuberant activity. There are subtle clues but visually they're usually a mystery. Bodie does feel like it was a real living town because the buildings are still very much intact — most even have glass still in the

windows. Many of the houses and old businesses have furniture, household items, tools, and other objects that define their purpose, inside.



Bodie is a State park but they did a nice job establishing it as one. Seems like they just hired a few rangers to keep an eye on the place and make sure that the vandals don't polish it off. They do minor restorations in order to keep buildings intact but that's about it. The phrase they use to describe their preservation effort is to keep it in a "state of arrested decay."

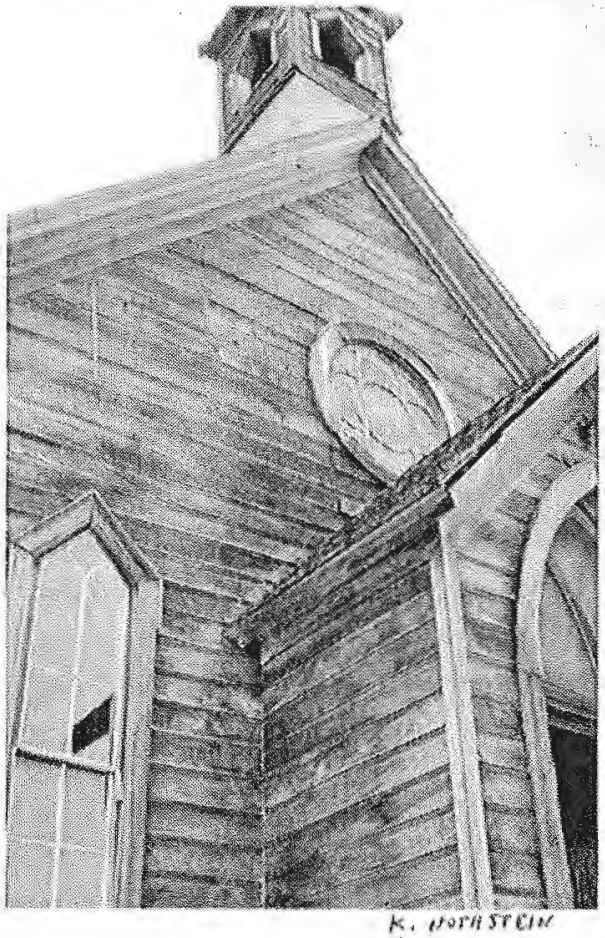
Visitors aren't allowed inside most of the buildings which I think is great. You know when you go to a historic house and get a tour? You know how the roped-off rooms, the reproduction or poorly-restored furniture, or the gift shop, usually seems wrong? Bodie isn't like that. You peer through the windows and see stuff as it was left. Some of the contents might be from the 1880s and some might be from the 1930s. You don't see clean floors where people are walking. It's a wonderful experience having to look through the windows. The experience makes you feel like you are peeping, which informs you that this place wasn't constructed merely for your entertainment. It off-sets what the usual museum-goer expects. You witness history through dirty glass and nothing on display was put there with today's visitor in mind.

As unique as the place is now, its beginnings mirrored other mining towns springing up during the second half of the 19th century. Waterman S. Bodey, "William" to his friends, discovered gold there in 1859 and established a mining camp. He never became rich. Instead, he worked his ass off only to end up sleeping outside during a blizzard. He never woke up, but his town sure did. In 1860 there were about twenty rough characters digging holes in the ground, but by 1880, something like 20,000 nutty people called "Bodie" (an illiterate sign painter caused this little screw-up to stick) home. As you could probably guess, the gold production was a mere trickle in the 1860s, but shortly after Leland Stanford, then Governor of the Golden State, declared that "the Standard Mine isn't worth fifty damn dollars!" and backed out his share of ownership, the other owners found the grand poo-bah vein they called the Fortuna Ledge and cashed in big. This little discovery made the town rich and consequently Leyland felt really really dumb. He even said so.

The Standard Mine Company followed that path of riches for decades.

Regardless of who owned it, the mine produced big, and everyone had their hand out. The effects of such riches reverberated throughout the community and a nice spread of a town grew around the mine. A railroad, lumber company, around sixty five saloons, two churches, and multiple other businesses were built on this mountain of gold. Hell, in the early nineties, Bodie experimented with electricity and became the first city in the world to operate off power generated from a remote facility. Bodie had a horse racing track, several social groups, two newspapers — even had good water. A cold spring on the outskirts of town never ceased from gushing the purest water. It was said to be the secret of the exceptionally tasty beer produced in the seven breweries that existed at one time. The beer was so yummy, that when the prohibition officers came to do their duty during that dark moment in our country's history, they made sure to take plenty of evidence back with them. The saloons back in operation before the feds even got back down the hill. Someone is rumored to have told the party poopers that, "Miners just can't work on soda pop."

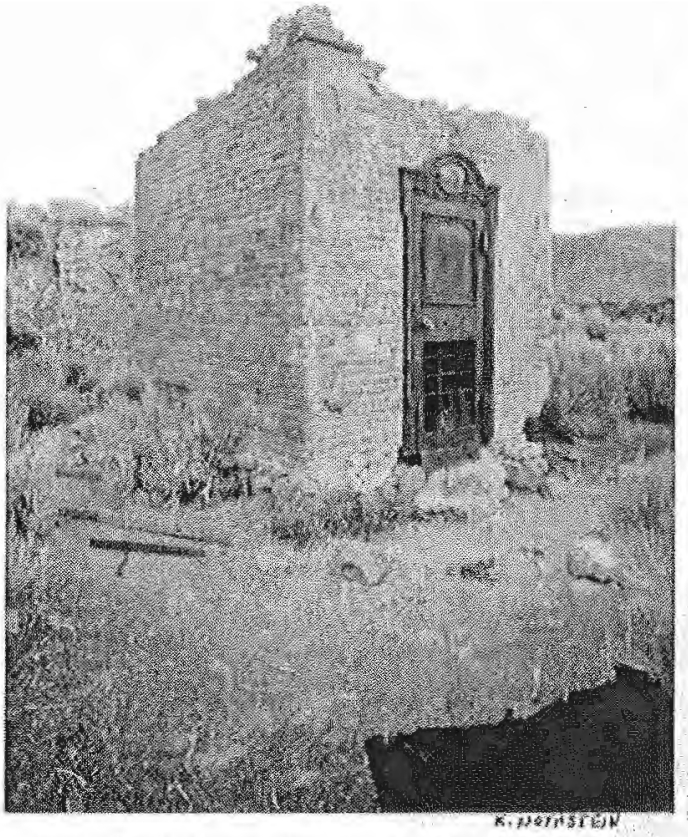
For at least a couple of decades, Bodie ripped it up. It had money, but was so new the dust of development hadn't yet settled. Was isolated high in the mountains in the middle of the desert, brought into being from the unstable business of mining, naturally having some rough edges that money alone couldn't smooth out. Bodie now has a reputation of being one of the roughest towns to exist at that time and I'll admit there are some good stories that support that opinion. A perfect example being the one about a Frenchy real suave type who went dancing with someone else's wife while her husband was in the mines working the night shift. Mr. Miner caught wind of the rumors, didn't like it much, got off work early one night to go to the dance hall and found his wife in the arms of Pierre. The sad part is that Mr. Miner ended up with a bullet in his back. A group of rough and tumble do-gooders with a taste for justice had earlier banded together and called themselves the 601 Vigilante Group. Their aim was to hunt down the local bad guys and nicely explain to them that it was a bad idea to be in town come sun-up. On this particular occasion, Pierre didn't wait to blow town after the crime. However, the "601" wanted to do more than just



K. Dorn Stein

kick his frenchy ass out of town. This case was a little more severe than the usual horse thieves they dealt with. They wanted blood, and they got it. The "601" found the Frenchy bastard hiding out in a cabin just outside of town and took him back and hung him above the blood stained snow of Mr. Miner that very night. Justice, cowboy style.

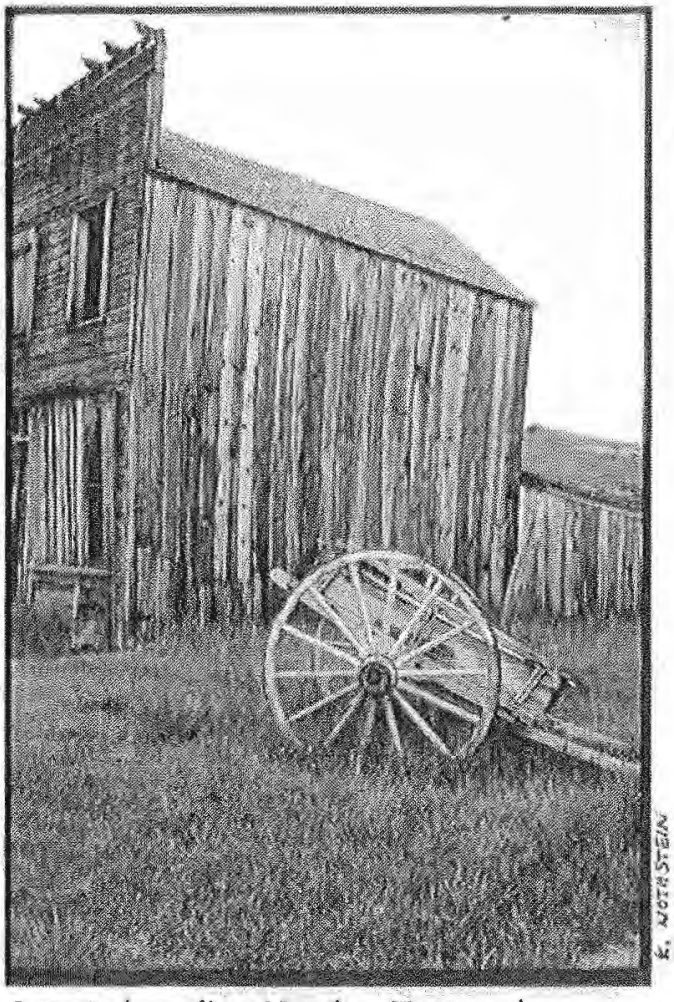
There are other stories too. Some are weird, some funny like, "Two Gun Al." Al said that he was paranoid about the lack of law in Bodie; that's why he carried two pistols. Truth is, Al just liked to get drunk and shoot stuff. He never hurt anyone but he was always being thrown in jail for his altered state. Al had good friends who would come by his cell in the middle of the night and pass tin cups filled with whiskey through the bars. When the deputy would come by in the morning good ole Al would still be wrecked.



Everything published about Bodie seems to state with certainty that it was the badest town in the west, and as I did research and began falling in love with the legend, I wanted to believe that there was nothing but truth to this statement. It's so fun to think that places, characters, and situations could have really existed like in the movie *High Noon*. It's interesting how our perception of the town was shaped by the printed word. Most literature, with the exception of one book, was brief and vague; often reprinting the same short blurb about a single account — whether fact or fiction is unclear: the little girl from Truckee who was overheard while praying, saying "Goodbye God, I'm going to Bodie." Nice, sure, but it begins to sound like that song *Louie Louie*, the first time you hear it, it fuckin' rocks, but after you've heard it a gazillion times it almost seems fake. I've always wanted to believe the legends but have a stronger desire to learn about the real Bodie.

I went to the library to get books to inform this article. Even though this is a simple zine put out by a lone crackpot and read, or glanced at, by a measly few, I wanted to do some research to offer up something more

than the legend-building briefs I usually run across. I was willing then to spend time with what I thought would be several dull, dry, old books. I have read a bunch of pamphlets and chapters in various ghost town books regarding Bodie, and have visited the place, but never gave time to books focusing specifically on its stories, history, etc.. Well, I found two books. One was a book of mediocre photographs of the town with a paragraph caption next to each picture — from 1967. The other, this being the exceptional one, was *The Story of Bodie* by Ella Cain, published in 1956. Oh boy, I thought, here we go with more of the same dry old stuff.



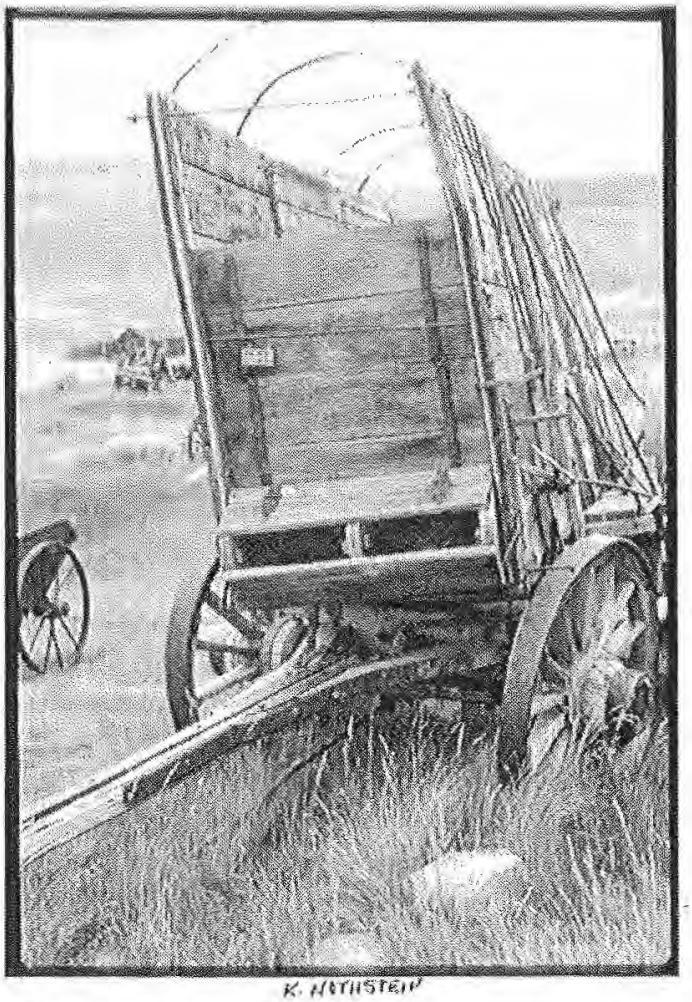
As I imagined, Book Number One wasn't very helpful. I started reading Number Two and became excited when I realized what I had in my hands. Ella Cain! She was born in Bodie in 1882, married to the owner of the Standard Mine's son, lived, and taught school there for decades. Her motivation for writing was to prevent Bodie's history and personal accounts of living there from being lost. She wrote this book when Bodie was beginning to deteriorate rapidly; almost no one lived there anymore and it had yet to become a state park. Bodie was, in 1956, in a similar state to many of the great ghost towns. Ella saw what was happening to these places and wanted to, in her own way, preserve what she could of this place that was so near to her heart. Her book was passionate, sincere, and remarkably written as true to fact as she could. Her research came from first-hand knowledge, stories from friends, and tying up all of the pieces with the facts gleaned from the old newspaper articles. Ella was on it. But, as with anyone who attempts to write true history, things got lost, blurred, and subject to personal bias.

I began to notice that most of the stuff written on Bodie is taken from her book and quite often a bastardization of her slant. I realized that the only reason for the many brief and similar Bodie write-ups is that there really is only one good source: Ella. It's a hell of a lot easier to plagiarize slightly than it is to dig a little deeper.

We still only have her accounts to base truth on and this book is

naturally biased due to her having lived there, known people and selected topics of her own interest. The story becomes even further removed from its source when rewritten by someone else in a different time and with a different purpose than hers. She indirectly asserted that Bodie was the most badass town in the west, and who, in 1998, can argue? Nobody is as qualified as her to even debate the issue. She experienced it, she wrote it down. She never lived in Rawhide Nevada or Aurora California, and the sad part is that no one from these towns have records like Ella's and now they are completely gone so we can't compare notes. She put her faith in the printed words, and because Bodie's now the lone document of a surviving ghost town/national landmark, it's easy for us to take the printed word for fact and hard to dispute.

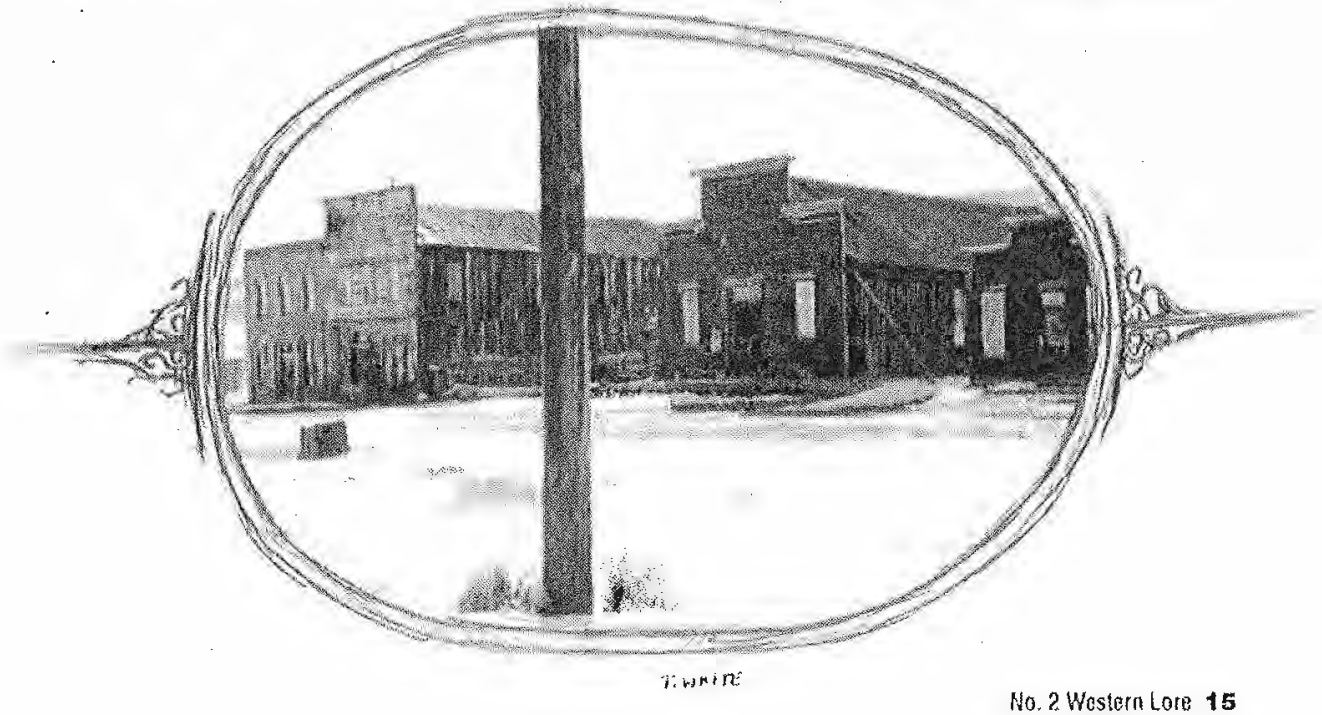
Besides the work of Ella Cain, another aspect of Bodie that makes it more popular than others ghost towns is the fact that more of it is still intact when compared to others like Rawhide and Aurora. Vandals and lack of care have killed most of these places off good and dead. It is truly unique that someone, with impeccable timing, had the foresight to preserve this historical site. They were able to see the direction the town was going in and put a stop to its decline. This action is rare and should not go under-appreciated. I still marvel at the knowledge that the extent of this preservation happened at all. Of the hundreds of towns that once existed, some even as large as Bodie, and I bet equally as exciting, this is the only town preserved in this manner. Most are completely gone with nearly nothing known of their history. Some have been disastrously altered from their original state and made to be way too touristy — like Calico Calif. where they've made it feel as fake as a movie set. Some, like Gold Point Nev., Belmont Nev., and others, have a handful of residents doing their best to keep the places alive but this tends to be a lot of work, a lot of money, and few visit or appreciate the effort because these towns aren't as well known as Bodie.



When you combine the unique work of Ella Cain with the equally strong effort of the preservationists, you get one

hell of a strong foundation on which to build a legend. Bodie has always been a helluva town, I'm sure, but as its big years recede further from us, this place will stand alone as the monument to a part of our western history and will allow a glimpse into what the other towns may have been; better, meaner, or maybe not — we'll never know. It's an honest open air history museum, paying homage to a culture and a lifestyle, and that, to me, is what makes Bodie really special.

I spoke again recently with my friend who had visited the place with disappointment. After researching and falling further in love with Bodie, asked her how she could've possibly had a bad experience. Her response reflected something that I hadn't given thought to previously. She said that it made her sad that the town had to be preserved. Because she has been to some lesser known places and had that great feeling of being alone with so much stuff — history, passage of time, and conceptual fight of emptiness and fullness — but it was hard to simply enjoy Bodie. She loved the town and that everything was preserved and assured to be there for the long haul. When a magical place like this is overrun with tourists, necessarily guarded, and far from ghostly or lonely, the experience is altered. It is a shame that it can't exist left alone. But it beats the hell out of standing in the middle of an empty desert where a town used to stand. Yeah, Bodie is alright.



Dispatch from the Southern Territories:

TUMCO

by: Sean Dungan and Gail Swanlund

Destination: Tumco, by way of the Salton Sea, Salvation Mountain, and Slab City. Our route angled Southward from demon Los Angeles through the layers of outskirt that really just constitute more city, till the succession of strange Southern ag-towns that look uncannily like something out of the Last Picture Show. Gas at $1.30 per gallon US, lowest octane. Sucking down date shakes from roadside date-goo stand, (consistency and flavor of shakes: thick and cloyingly sweet, respectively) we hauled ass to beat the sunset to the place mysteriously called Tumco.

We have erotic dreams about ghost towns. Our map is peppered with red dots, each one a spot we've never been. We plan our trips the morning of by randomly choosing a red marker. Then the Itinerary and Route dept. works out the details. The gear is assembled, the vehicles packed. (A complete listing of gear and provisions lists and instructions is available for scrutiny at our website.) From the dept.'s research library of one volume, *A Guide to Western Ghost Towns* by Lambert Florin (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1967), a briefing is assembled as we barrel down whatever succession of roads (highlighted with red grease pencil) leads to the target. In regards to Tumco, our info was sketchy. Often one of the hottest places in the nation, temps reaching 120°+. Old mine town. Gold. Located in the Cargo Muchacho Mountains ("Loaded Boys," and we're assuming not w/ booze). Because of the vintage of our research library, it's always a gamble as to whether there will actually be anything there when we arrive. Sometimes there's just seamless, unscarred desert, signs of people or industry long gone. Maybe there's a plaque, compliments of that benevolent drunken historical society, the Clampers. Things can disintegrate amazingly fast out in the desert. One day, a town bustles. The next

it's swallowed up by toxic, briny mud, or folks turn their backs on it for a second, and it's just dried up and blown away. Human-related things out here only exist due to the artificial injection of pilfered water. As soon as the water stops, so does everything else, including mine towns.

Day 1, 7:50 PM: We arrived at the mouth of desolation just as the sun was setting. Darkened silhouettes of the mountains described in our guidebook as "unimaginably barren" seem friendly enough, if one has been raised without human contact of any sort. Not a critter noted, except for the ever-hardy and friendly roach, or what looked to be the tough and larger forebears of the common house variety. A particularly cheerful proto-roach lodged itself in the armpit of one of the research sub-team members, and refused to leave. It was finally contained and reserved for later analysis. Camp was established and bedrolls unwrapped without further incident. Dinner prepared and feed-bags tied on. As the weird darkness of the desert night started oozing down, it became difficult to recall what the landscape looked like in the daytime, a phenomenon the team relishes. The desert is utterly and absolutely transformed by the shift-change between sun and moon, becoming a quasi-visible cobalt version of what it was hours before, newly silent, submarine. The senses become dilated, nerve endings re-tuned to accept new, more subtle, information. It was in this quiet and awe-struck mood that one of the hooch bottles began to circulate amongst the team members. For the moment, the scientific method was ignored. (For more on the liquor, see footnote.)

Day 2, 5:10 AM: our fearless team scrambled upright from the dust. We breakfasted on Crown Prince kippered snacks washed back w/ black coffee, scrubbed-up sailor-style and regrouped in the direct and 98° sunlight of hardcore Martian morning. Blinking, we took in what only hours ago was slightly less than visible, the Muchachos: a ring of huge, crumbly rock pile foothills that were either shoved up from the desert floor pretty much as-is or melted slowly down from the green mountains that they once were in some long-ago geologic period. A small valley floor lay below them where the town once churned and milled. People lived here, worked, had families, died, were interred. (For a more in-depth survey of the geological formations and notorious inhabitants of this region, please refer to our report, "Calexico Geology and Post-Survivalist Monuments of Route 8 (Old Highway 80)," in *Edging Toward the Borders,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976, pp. 115-223.) Once the canteens were plenished from the tanks, we struck out due east into the heart of what was once downtown Tumco.

7:30 AM: it is hard to imagine anyone *working* out here. It's hard enough to walk around, let alone haul rocks about in the sun w/ a mighty hangover and lungs full of fine dust. Lucky for those poor bastards most of the work was done sub-terrain. The thermometers register 112°, and the sun is palpable; the sunlight seems to have mass, weight, and velocity. There is wind but no relief from heat. The wind is actually hotter than the

still air. When it is this hot, each mounting degree of Fahrenheit seems to increase the actual temperature exponentially, so that the space between 99 and 100 is miles-wide. It is scary to imagine a 120' day out here, but interesting to think about a meeting between one of our Tumco miners and some pussy 49er from the North, one of those pampered gold rush freelancers who could waltz into any general store and trade all their worldly possessions for a sluice-box and a shovel, slosh mud around, and sleep on beds of pine needles, all at temps in the comfortable 60 to 80's range. *Our* boys had to deal with not only the aforementioned hellish temps, but had to work in the most dangerous mines in the southwest. Lots of deadly shaft-filling gasses, frequent cave-ins, sudden fires. Think about all that and add on the nasty affects of the previous evening's indulgences, a case of miner's consumption (dust in lungs) in the baby stages, and indebtedness to an exploitative mining company (miners had to shell out 50% of their two dollar day rate for rent, plus get all their gear and food in company stores). I'll bet our man would make short work of the Northern mountain and placer pansy-boy even with a full-on hang-over[1] and eyes full of rock dust.

Our reference book has one photograph of Tumco in the sixties: a crumbling adobe building, the remains of a roof perched on top like a sick crow about to drop off a branch. A few of the walls were still there, their surfaces carved with the slogans and initials of yahoo visitors from the ages. But little else — mostly squarish piles of stones about the size of small shacks, a few larger piles that must have been things like tavern/whorehouses or whatever other industry that required space larger than 10x10. Holes: a well, sides cemented to keep it from caving in, probably by the Bureau of Land Use Management, which, we learned later, caretakes this site; mine-shafts, some going straight down like eight-foot diameter monster versions of the well, others pock the surrounding mountains, little black holes filled with cool air and the desertion of purpose.

On closer inspection, most of the really fun-looking shafts turned out to have been sealed over with iron bars, or, in the case of the vertical, thousand-foot-drop-kind, surrounded by chain-link and razor wire. These would be great places to drop a corpse. Rumor has it that there are a bunch down there already. There is a sign erected by the BLM on the outskirts of the site that says something like: 'miners were good diggers,

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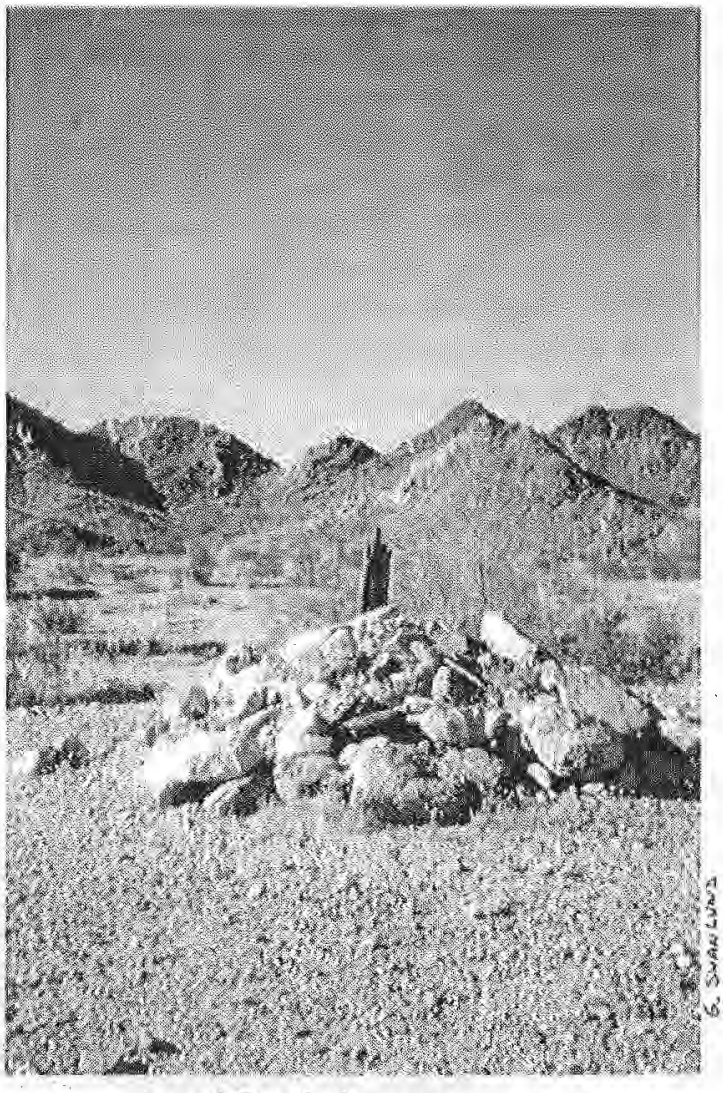
[1] In order to best appreciate the experience of those one-time inhabitants of old Tumco, we are alternated swigs of water with pulls from one of the specimen jars labeled 'WHISKY'. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain an approximation of the stuff that must have been available to the common desert miner of the period. We voted to exclude cheap supermarket varieties from our selection because they would almost definitely be worse, deciding instead to obtain supplies of excellent quality, which could be enjoyed during experiments like those involved in the Tumco expedition, as well as at all other times. We settled on a case of 1971 Aberlour single malt.

but they were bad at filling in the holes, so be careful. Stay away from pits, cave-ins are frequent,' etc. There are big steel gates blocking the roads so that you can't drive onto the site, which is now covered by hardened-powder trailings from the cyanide ore-processing place. One wonders how safe this stuff is. It gets thicker as it approaches the surrounding hills, and looks like pinkish-yellow dried mudflows. Apparently, the company would pile it up in great powdery heaps, the outside would crust, and that would be it until the first sprinkle of rain.



Like Pompeii, Tumco slept fitfully, sweating and tossing until the moment of truth, when a small crack in the hardened cone of doom broke open and flooded the town with lazy flows of goo, chocolate streams of waste that choked out sleep, filled the places where air should be, crept into the mouths of slumbering babes, enveloped spent sporting girls and finally, seeped under and around spectacular miner mustachios, sealing eyes and stopping the breath of all. The steady oppressive weight of the steaming floods of mud could take down a sturdy rock foundation stone by stone, squeezing the life out of it, obscuring any traces of human handiwork. Creeping out on these flows today we experienced the precise temperature-opposite of walking on crusted snow that threatens to give way; tentative and at any moment one may be plunge waist-deep into the heated stew of still-liquid ooze. The team shimmied out onto one of the over-six-foot deep flows without incident and crossed to the far corner of town.

We approached the remains of a cemetery located in a grey rectangle of slight hill on the perimeter. A dozen-ish unmarked gravesites of piled-up rocks were neatly laid out side-by-side, orderly dorm beds of rocks, bones and organ dust. The Author of the research library is not infallible. In his brief report on Tumco, he described the cemetery as 'pathetic,' 'forlorn,' and 'lonely.' But a more glorious resting place this team has never found. Just about the only spot not at least partially covered by the

ancient trailings-flow, the cemetery is relatively pristine. One marker still intact, a splinter of reddish wood pointing at the sky. Though, over time, all of the other components of the town were dismantled or salvaged or scattered by the winds, the cemetery remains unmolested. Nobody has given in to the urge that more than one team member felt: to unpile the rocks, stone by stone, and peer at what lay underneath.

High noon: we took cover under the only green to disrupt the relentlessly yellow landscape, a luscious tree that is post-haste to be strangled by parasitic mistletoe-ish flora, we lunched on packed provisions and drained nearly the last of our earlier considerable supply of water and whisky.

2:30 PM: Arrived back at base camp, cooled & curried down the pack-burros, watered and offered them an extra measure of oats fortified with local dates. Shortly thereafter, as quickly as possible (thermometer reading 117°), the team loaded up for the journey north-westerly back to the home office to prepare reports, lectures and further research.

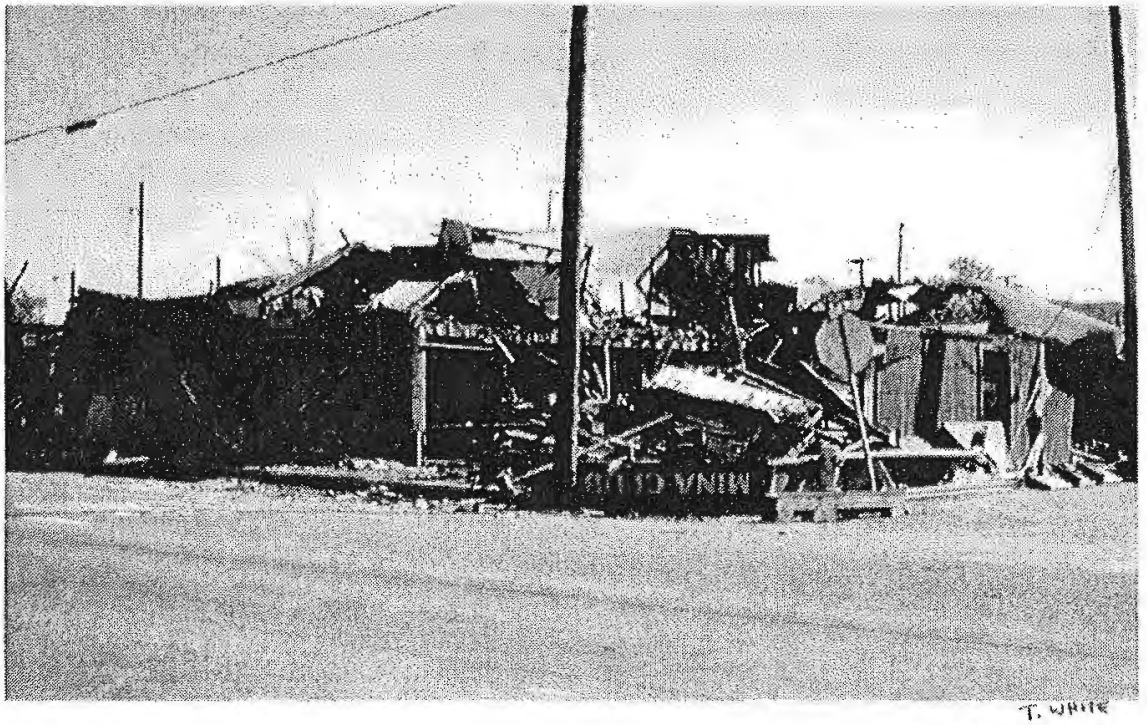
Next on the southern territory tour: Rhyolite, The Queen City of Death Valley.

MINA CLUB R.I.P.

We embarked on another trip out into the wilds of central Nevada a couple of months back. While planning our route, we decided to curve our path to make sure that we'd go through the Indian reservation at Schurz in order to buy boat-loads of illegal fireworks (we collectively spent around $300 between the five of us) and the town of Mina so that we could stop and enjoy a frosty beverage before leaving "civilization."

If you have read Western Lore Brand Magazine, Issue Number One, then you might recall the write up on the Mina Club — one of the publisher's favorite desert watering holes. If you haven't, stop reading now and pick up Issue Number One. If you aren't blessed with the presence of said publication, well, then get out your checkbook and write a check for the big ole amount of one buck and mail it to the address listed on the inside cover of this issue. Scribble out the words, "Rush me a copy of Issue Number One!" on a napkin or something and mail it to me. Then, in a matter of days, you can read the story of the Mina Club and then continue reading this story. Okay?

Anyway, as we arrived in Mina, our spirits were bashed hard by what we saw. Yup, this here picture is what the Mina Club looks like today.



T. White

Burnt crisp. We talked to someone who was rummaging around for unharmed goodies, and asked them when this catastrophic event took place. "Four days ago," was the reply. Four stinking days previous we could've been sucking on some cold ones while listening to Nevada's star jukebox. We grumbled, spit, and kicked a rock. Fuckin' A. What could you do? We hopped back in the trucks and headed into the hills.

The loss of the Mina Club bothered me the entire time we were in the desert. What a tragedy. How could this have happened? The place has been there for decades. I was kicking myself for not asking the rummager more questions.

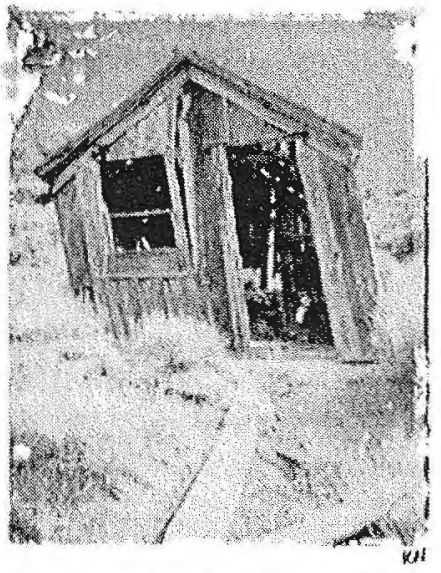
On our way out we stopped by the little store in Schurz and I picked up the latest issue of the *Mineral County News*. On the front page was an article about the blaze that destroyed this little desert gem. Apparently, the blaze started around 11:00am but since all of the firefighters were volunteers and working in neighboring towns, far away from Mina — even though the fire department was located directly across the street (!) — the place was burned flat before anything could be done. The article said — and this is the troubling aspect of the story — that "the women of the community did a fine job of getting the hoses ready" and "other tasks" so that when the men returned they could put the ashes out.

This article had a brief paragraph on the history of the place. No surprises really. According to the Mina "Historian," it was built as a general store around the turn of the century and had been a bar since the twenties, only changing owners a couple of times.

And that was it, the whole story! I read it a couple more times and sure enough, I hadn't missed anything. But what started the damn fire?! Why the @#$%&*!!! hadn't the women, who were qualified enough to get the hoses ready, been able to turn on the water and squirt a little? Hell, why aren't they trained to fight the fires of the community if the flunky men are off in other towns all day? Oh, why did this place have to roast?

I wrote a nice little ole letter to all three Hughes brothers who put out the newspaper and asked them those very questions. They must be too busy covering all of the other hot stories taking place locally than to write back. There's something weird about those people.

DEFINITION OF A Ghost Town



Many trips to the library to do research on ghost towns have proven to be exhausting. I'd begin to find the good stuff, you know — info on ghost towns I didn't know existed — and I'd get super-duper excited. The pictures would show a bunch of buildings in good shape, the surrounding environment would be equally appealing, and a particular book would describe it as a ghost town, but guess what? It would be a town that a bunch of people live in — still a functioning town. I'd be so let down. Now, wouldn't you think that this sort of thing would be misleading and tend to piss you off? In a way it does, but I can't really blame the authors of these books. These functioning towns are different than other small towns in a way that isn't easy to describe, and it seems apt to label them something as abstract as ghost towns.

Often, the authors of these books try hard to be as specific as possible when defining the difference between these sites. They will try to at least set their own standards, and list them clearly, so as not to be contradictory or misleading. The authors will modify the term and call the towns "partial ghosts," "true ghosts," or "tourist ghosts," for example. One will fit into this category, one into that — falsely clear. These terms end up being just splinters of the whole board. Not a single one of these towns can fit neatly into those categories. Each of these towns are entirely too unique. Geeks like me that want to know what each of these sites are about, in as much detail as we can get, want information that makes these kind of definitions almost as un-useful as the broader term of ghost town. Take Bodie, for instance. This is the only ghost town that I'm aware of that is an official State Park. It would be stupid to call one place a "State Park True Ghost." You'd end up with way too many definitions to do any good thinking in that way.

To make things worse, the "ghost" in the "ghost town" is about as clear as your thinking with a good hangover. I've pondered the elusive quality of this term for some time. I used to think of "ghost" in this context as a bunch of hogwash — a nonsense word dreamed up by the hokey old westy romancers who like to make things sound lofty. I've changed my way of thinking about this. I tend not to be so harsh and judgmental these days. Maybe it's that I'm getting old and losing my quick snide-ness, becoming too accepting. But these days I consider the word more than acceptable, it's just that a lot of people aren't aware enough of what makes a ghost town a ghost town, regardless of location, population, content, and all that. There is a certain feeling that is present that can't be talked about easily, and it's necessary to label it abstractly.

I'll use an example here to try and clear this up.

I was on a road-trip a couple of years ago with my then-girlfriend Christine and we drove through the town of Goldfield Nev.. (Western Lore #1 has a riveting expose on this captivating town.) It was an extremely hot summer day and we parked the car, got out and went for a stroll. We stopped at a little junk shop that was housed in a building made partially of old glass bottles and mortar. I'd heard of a place like this in Rhyolite but had never seen one. It was really nice. The sun glistened off the bottles. Seemed like a perfect building material for the time that it was built (around the turn of the century). These crazy-ass mining towns in Nevada usually had more saloons than anything else and their modes of trash removal or recycling were not quite as efficient as today. Here was a real monument, not too thought-out or constructed as most official ones are, but rather, a sincere testament to a culture.

So anyway, we were in the shop, checking out the usual antique-y junk that people passing by would stop and marvel, while being thoroughly entertained by the geezer running the place. The store had the usual assortment of old glass bottles, and since the place was built from them, it seemed like an obvious conversation topic. The guy knew his stuff too. He told us how they got their color, why certain ones were the shapes they were, how some would get fucked up in the process. When I asked him how much he wanted for an old cow skull I uncovered, he just shook his head and said, "Ah hell, I don't know." He launched into a story of "that poor old cow," and told us how bad that winter was that took its life. "Didn't have much of a chance." I could tell this guy wanted to rid himself of the memories of that cow. I thought it would be cool in a hillybilly kind of way to have a skull to hang somewhere in my house, and shit, with the story of the cow, I had to have it. I gave him $6 for it and Christine bought an old purple glass jar for something like $2.

I found myself back in Goldfield just a few months ago. I was traveling with a bunch of friends and we had decided to stop off and have a beer. It was a cold winter day, I was a couple of years older, and Christine and I had broken up a few months prior. Things were different. I took a walk over to the old building made of bottles. Sagebrush grew in the path where shopper's feet used to walk, a small snowdrift stood guard in the doorway and guts were empty. The little junk shop was so long gone that I began to wonder if I fabricated the experience Christine and I had.

It was really strange, like a clashing of memory, time, season, and other complexities, all of the tangible pieces so fragmented that you couldn't quite make sense of the whole from where it came. This unsettling feeling absorbs you and disrupts clear thinking by scattering strong emotionally charged specks all over the lens of that moment. In a word, it's haunting.

No words, especially a solitary one, can describe that feeling with any degree of accuracy. Because of this, it is necessary to employ a term that while fighting hokey associations, has the abstract and vague nature that "ghost town" embodies. This open-ness to interpretation reflects the mystery and intrigue of these places and thus constitutes the use of the term. A ghost town can exist in any place, in any form, and it's up to us to attach meaning.

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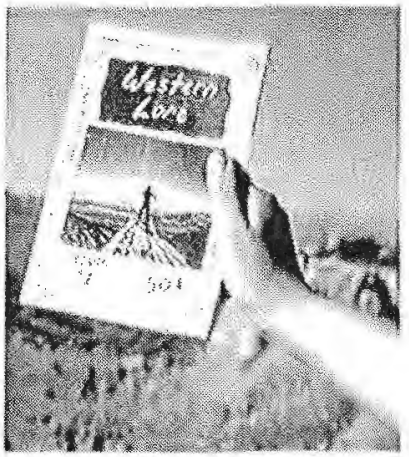

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